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Fanny Colonna [*]

Abstract: When dealing with the question of Algerian "elites" – a term which, by the way, is never used locally – a basic contradiction will become apparent. "National" they were indeed, those new social categories (doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers, and so on) that the Colonial presence created, either directly or indirectly, among the French or the Arab population. But they became "nationalistic", meaning that they sought to break completely with the Colonial power, only much later, when the guerilla warfare began in 1954. Focusing on the period between 1920 and 1954, and using archives and interviews, I will try to show today the essential role played by education, particularly by the "Colonial system of education". That system was a "structuring machine" which irresistibly and lastingly contributed to reshaping society from top to bottom as well as the relationship between the two languages. And though the 1954 Revolution denied it, that structure is still alive and functioning today.

1. A "composite" education system that developed progressively in Colonial Algeria

I will not go into a description of the *system of social stratification* that prevailed in pre-colonial Algeria, because it would be necessarily sketchy, for lack of time. What's important to point out here, is that – originally – school knowledge was neither the main criterion for choosing the elites nor the main instrument of social mobility. Though much respected due to its role in religion, it was not especially connected to wealth either. The situation changed when the French arrived in 1830, because they violently destroyed or subverted the old hierarchies. In particular, they imposed in 1883 exactly the same system of education that existed in metropolitan France. Rapidly, "education *à la française*", which had been implemented only in patches, became the main leverage for social mobility among the indigenous society. But a self-propagating teaching system can never be forcibly implemented and it is rare that it should appear on a *tabula rasa*. So three questions must be asked:

a) How, as of 1880, did the French system manage to impose itself? was it only because it represented the dominant power?

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b) Somewhat later, around 1920, what was the "educational supply" on the Algerian side? Was the native teaching system completely destroyed? Or was it reactivated and ready to make a deal with the dominant power?
c) Education was rare in a society ravaged by savage conquests, famines and emigration; intellectuals, especially, left the country. What were the consequences of the fact that such a rare commodity as schooling was made available on several different sides?

Answer number one: (a) French schooling was not imposed by the Army but by the school system itself. The school system wanted to distinguish itself not only from brutal military force, but also from the colonists' impulse to recommend that the natives should receive only elementary and occupational training, so as to have a usable workforce at their disposal. The following words spoken by Education Commissioner Jeanmaire in 1907 are often quoted: "What's good for our children is also good for the Moslems."

That meant that what was essential in the colonial relationship was the appearance but also to a certain extent, the reality of the *neutrality* of schools (even though European and Arab children did not attend school together before the nineteen-fifties). The result was that, in less than 40 years, instead of refusing French schools, they came into demand. In 1903, the number of Moslems attending school represented 18 % of the total school population in Algeria, quite a remarkable score, even considering the overall demographic imbalance.

(b) Meanwhile, the native school supply had not disappeared: but it was trapped inside the social structure, in the tribes rather than in the towns, and in the network of religious brotherhoods (the *Zawayas*, monasteries of sorts). Also, friendship networks pushed young people towards the diasporas of *Zawayas* in the neighboring countries (Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and even Egypt), and towards the large Islamic universities. These efforts ended up by producing, in the 1920s and 30s, the rise of the so-called Reformist Movement, in the form of an association of national importance, thanks to some charismatic personalities emanating from the privileged classes of the native society, such as Sheikh Ben Badis or Sheikh El Okbi and their disciples. Strongly influenced by the French school model, but also by Egypt, the Movement ended up marginalizing the *Zawayas* as well as the local, traditionalist intellectuals. Very cautious also in the face of the colonial authority, the Reformist movement has two main objectives:

- -To promote a renewed Islam adapted to the modern world;
- -To restore Arabic, rightly considered as an endangered language.

The famous motto went: "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country"; it was a nationalistic façade, but underneath, the motto was not nationalistic and neither was the Movement. Or if it was nationalism, it was a nationalism connected to identity, not to politics, a moderate sort of nationalism made of personal convictions. That becomes quite clear when one

read the newspapers and the public speeches made by its leaders, who spoke in terms that astound our students in Algeria today. The tie to France was not questioned – a fact that was to create complications later.

To sum up, one can describe the situation around 1930 as follows:

(a) Table 1

If one considers only the Moslem populations and their educational opportunities, one had, from top to bottom of Table One, the possibility of either attending a French Primary School or a Koranic school (or a school of the Reformist Movement). The Primary School Diploma (CEP) remained very prestigious until 1945 at least. Without actually being a diploma, repeating 60 chapters of the Koran marked the end of Koranic School.

Both French and Koranic or Reformist schools may have been attended during the same period by the same child; parents decided what the child should do when he was approximately 12 years old.

The decisive cut-off was secondary school: The sections leading to high school (*lycée*) and university are on the left-hand side of the table. Very few Algerians were in these sections: although they represented 85% of the population, they accounted for only 7 % of the *lycée* students in 1937; in 1940, there were 89 Algerian students registered in a university, in 1954, 500 out of 5000.

The "middle" sections *(those in the middle of the Table).*

These sections did not give access to university and were the ones where nearly all of the native elites were formed between 1880 and 1940. They – mostly clerks in health, agriculture, law and administration – became the indispensable intermediaries that allowed the Colonial system to function properly. Training was mainly in French (sometimes in French and Arabic, for interpreters).

The Arabic sections *(on the right-hand side of the table).*

They represent the native system of education, both its reformist and traditional sector. Arabic was the only language used. We do not know how many students were in these sections. Very few left for the cities or went abroad and their training did not guarantee they would find employment. Countless young people trained in a tribe (on the extreme right-hand side of the table) but such training did not carry much prestige.

(b) Table 2

But now, if we turn the Table around 45 degrees and look at the numerical inequalities and the social status of the pupils in the various sections, we can see that the system was in fact quite rigidly stratified. The children who went to *lycée* and then on to university belonged to the native Colonial elite and a few

well-off peasant families. The small functionaries in the public sector sent their children to Middle School (*Collège*) and then put them into the vocational "middle sections". The poor peasants and farm workers sent their children to Koranic school and often for a short time only at that. A small number lived in the *Zawayas*; extremely few reached the Islamic universities outside the country.

(c) An important point remains, that is the language question,

which is still unresolved today, i.e. the domination of French over Arabic.

- -The francophone sections allowed one to enter the *professions* via a national diploma
- - The middle and lower sections led to a *craft*, except for elementary school teachers

What's more, the Arab-speaking sections trained in subjects which were later exposed to suspicion, insecurity and arbitrary behavior on the part of the police.

Thus the colonial system is not a dichotomy, it's not two worlds that ignore each other but on the contrary, worlds which observe each other with envy (but the envy only goes one way).

The system strongly structured the society and lastingly so. Arab speakers were and are still today in an inferior, dominated position. The Reformists' struggle, seen as a metaphor for Cultural resistance, failed. The head-start of those who were in the French sections in 1918-20 could never be equaled, at least as far as social mobility and prestige are concerned.

2. Why the Algerian elites, though national were nevertheless not nationalistic before 1954, or even 1956

Let us return to the first table and its data: one can see that most Moslem Algerians who continued studying after the CEP (itself a rare achievement) did so in the middle sections following the Upper Primary curriculum crowned by the "*Brevet*" (not the Baccalaureate). One also can see that the period between the end of World War One in 1918 and the beginning of the War of Liberation (Independence) in 1954, is when the intermediary elite was trained (a few thousand, less than 5000), very carefully instructed and formatted. The role of that intermediary corps was technical: they taught the language of the Colonizer, translated the language of ordinary people, taught them about hygiene, about improving agriculture, protecting the forests, and so on... Here is a quotation from a doctoral dissertation in Legal Studies in 1910 by one who has come to be regarded as an expert on the subject:

> Though we cannot immediately destroy the mosques or abolish the Moslems' personal legal status, nor use violence to force those 4 million subjects to

> speak French, and though we are obliged to let them have their priests, judges and scientists, we can act upon those *spiritual leaders* so as to modify Moslem society little by little, and in time, lead it to adopt our language, our laws, our customs and also our religious and philosophical eclecticism. (Poulard, *L'enseignement pour les indigènes en Algérie - Teaching Natives in Algeria)*

That quotation is especially illuminating, because it gives us direct access to the ambiguous project of those "middle sections" and to the complex expectations of the colonial authorities. The native elites were needed to manage the cohabitation, meaning one educated French person for ten natives. Historically those natives had come from another world, the fringes of the Ottoman Empire. All those elements had to be made to work together without violence, to find a consensus. At the same time, we cannot disregard the *French project of universal civilization*, which the Paris Parliament as well as the European schoolteachers or doctors "in the bush" sincerely believed in, all the while choosing to put off until the last possible minute, its inevitable effects, i.e. the natives' political coming of age.

What people were taught in the middle sections was conceived *with great care* to achieve that complex result. Unfortunately, aside from my own work on the training of schoolteachers (my doctoral dissertation under the guidance of P. Bourdieu, and a book in 1975), there is no work in Social History on the other sections, particularly the bilingual ones, which is of course easy to understand. One can simply assume that the training of "native teachers" became the laboratory for the other sections.

– I would now like to present, though I will be obliged to *simplify outrageously*, what I have called the "correct distance principle" i.e. the common paradigm in the training of all the native elites, which remained operational until 1954. Thanks to the statistical analysis of a thousand student-teachers files from 1883 to 1939, correlated with the personal opinions given in their evaluations at the end of their studies, we can observe that "model" concretely. I further refined it by analyzing a sample of one hundred of those evaluations, taking into account the vocabulary used in the personal opinions with respect to the students' social and especially geographic origins (urban/rural), an extremely important, perhaps the most important, variable.

One can see that, as far as training was concerned, nothing was left to chance in the program. I will now take off from the final product to see the conclusions that can be drawn (in an utterly simplified manner).

First conclusion, the primacy of morals:

Future teachers were trained to *act morally and to promote civilization;* the pedagogical objective was secondary and remained in the background. The main objective was to train cultural mediators from the "barbarian culture" and put them in charge of spreading the legitimate French culture. Given that, it

was out of the question to favor intellectual qualities; that would have been too risky.

Two early examples in 1887

"Fanatical, sly, intelligent. Works hard. Will most likely be a *mediocre* agent." And, symmetrically but at the opposite end: "Sickly, rather serious, not very intelligent, hardworking. Can become a *assistant teacher"*. Over time, the evaluations become less simplistic, but the homogenous nature of the categories employed (intelligent equals dangerous, hardworking equals useful), remains constant.

Second conclusion: the search for a compromise

There was a search for compromise between being brilliant and being serious. There are in fact two ways of being judged *passable* i.e. *bad*: by being too heavy, too introverted, violent, too Arab or too Kabyle, or on the contrary, by being too lightweight, too inconsistent, too devoid of morals. Similarly, one is *good*, because one is hardworking, even if one is not terribly intelligent.
So you have *two series of opposites* in relation to a *center* which is the golden mean between moral qualities and intelligence, a *center that becomes the definition of excellence* but which, out of one thousand student-teachers investigated, was attained by only 11 %. As to the others, 31% were considered "*good"*, 31 others "average" and 26 % *passable*, in other words "*bad"*.

Third conclusion: finding the correct distance

A different interpretation shows that these oppositions point to *two halves*, one having to do with the lack of acculturation, the other with too much acculturation; thus the qualities required are in a both symmetrical but strict opposition.

In the sample of 100 evaluations, those I considered "too acculturated" were of urban origin and had contacts with Europeans. Those in the "not acculturated enough" group were country people. The School thus oscillated between praising and suspecting those who were the most acculturated. This means that the real reference was the legitimate culture. However, a negative pole remains, which is the culture of origin; so it is very important not to stray too far from it, else you miss your chance to become an intermediary.

This all becomes very clear in the light of the eulogy pronounced at Mohamed Fatah's funeral. He was one of the first native teachers, had directed a "native school" in the Algiers Kasbah until 1910.

> Mohamed Fatah was especially competent in that delicate function …Due to his origins …he was penetrated by the *enchantment* that Islam casts on people's minds (*sic*). Then French schooling arrived …and the culture he got there opened up new horizons for him. Mohamed Fatah never gave up his first beliefs but his faith was neither narrow nor exclusive …Both serene and open-

minded, he was perfectly tolerant, the fruit of a French culture whose eminent fecundity he proclaimed (*Bulletin de l'enseignement des indigenes (The Native Teacher's Bulletin*) (1910).

The moral "program" I have exposed here explains the relationship not of submission to, but of composition with the system, which those *well balanced* products of the Teachers' Training College and twin sections actually developed. Very active in voluntary associations, those actors never spoke badly of the colonial tie with France before approximately 1954. Except for a few, they all belonged to the UDMA, the party founded by a pharmacist, Ferhat Abbas, who was also to be first President of the Temporary Algerian Government in Tunis (before 1962), but who only joined the FLN (National Liberation Front) in 1956. As to the products of the Arab-speaking sections, founded as early as 1931 by Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, they were organized within an association or party, Jama'at al Ulama, whose demands did not exceed those of the UDMA *except where Arabic was concerned.*

So you see that there we have a few thousand members of a "cultivated elite", the start of a true national elite and a well-formed middle class, fairly militant, with a progressive bilingual press representing several tendencies; open to the rest of the world, but careful not to risk an open break with the metropolis (mainland France) and the Colonial authority.

3. Arrival of a new collective actor, a "plebeian" party

Since 1936, *an autonomist party*, the PPA, born in the Workers' Diaspora in 1926 and led by a charismatic speaker, Messali Hadj, became active in Algeria. By immediately demanding independence, it completely reshuffled the cards of Political militancy. It was not only an autonomist party, it was also *anti-intellectualist*, and from the start pinpointed those middle-class elites as its class enemy and the ones that had to be fought against. A rift then took place between the rising middle class, based on meritocratic, modernism and more or less conservative principles, and the real nationalists, who were still in the absolute minority.

- The consequences of that structural antagonism were quite far-reaching. In spite of educated individuals who joined the nationalist camp, those schooled in Arabic or in French remained suspect during the Liberation War. After independence, a strange division of labor was set up: on one side, the technocrats, who had been trained in French schools, took over the industrialization of the country, applying the Socialist model; on the other side, there were the "defenders of authenticity", who had gone through the Arab-speaking system and kept for themselves the administration of justice, State religion but also schooling.

The recurrent obsession was to reverse the domination of French over Arabic, to turn Arabic into the real language of the Nation, which seems more or less to be the case still today.

- - However, that compromise was not able to resist the Islamic tidal wave of 1991.

Figure: Types of relations toward the school and the dominant culture

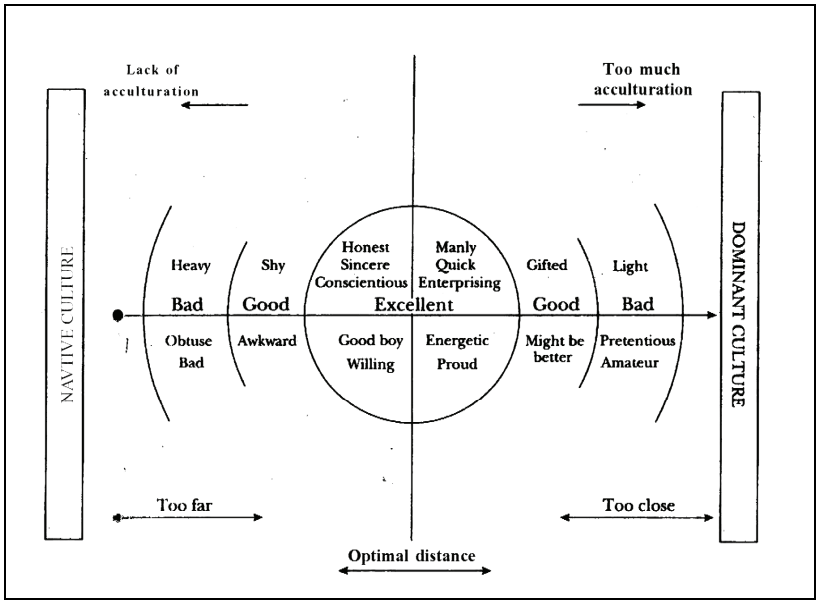

Table 1: Educational possibilities “for the natives” in Algeria between the Jules Ferry Reform and WWII

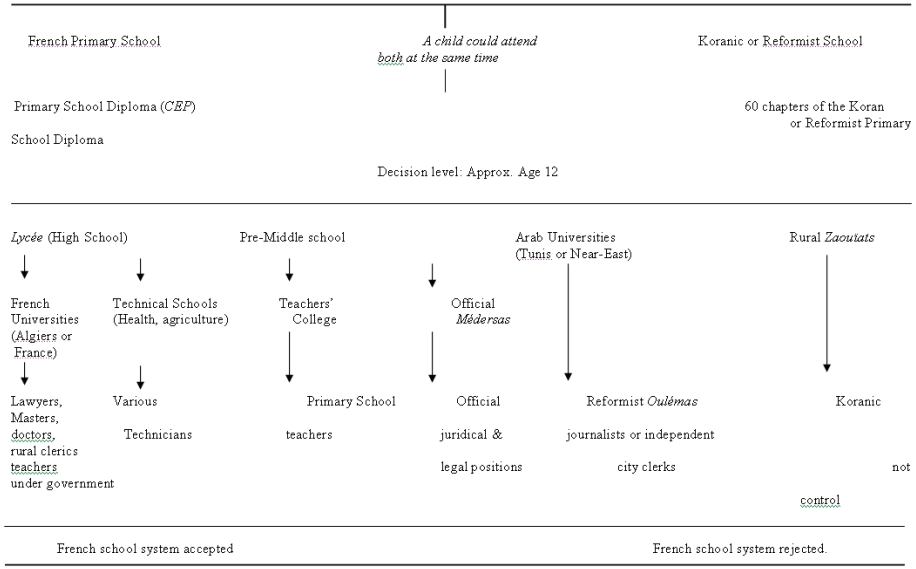

Table 2: Social Stratification of the Education System in Colonial Algeria

Social Stratification of the Education System in Colonial Algeria				
Social Origins	*Beginning of school*	*Type of school*	*End of schooling*	*Careers*
Colonial Elites (*caïds, cadis*, officers, etc.) Landed aristocracy Bourgeoisie)	French school (Primary school Certificate)	Lycées	French universities	Professions (doctors, lawyers)
		Upper Primary School	Upper certificate (*Brevet*)	Administration, School teacher, official juridical & legal positions, various technical occupations
		Pre-Middle school		
Well-off peasantry (esp. Kabyles) Public employees				
Shopkeepers and craftsmen in urban settings	Koranic school (60 chapters of the Koran).	Reformist schools	Arab universities	Teacher of Arabic. Predication. Journalism. Koranic teaching & rural clerics.
Poor peasants Farm workers		Rural *Zaoulats*		

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